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SUBJECT: GOP PREVIEWS NEW NATIONAL SECURITY PLAN

REF: (A) PANAMA 0919 (B) PANAMA 1371

Classified By: Ambassador William A. Eaton for Reasons 1.5(b and d).

¶1. (S) Summary: At the Ambassdor's request, Panama's National Security Director Erick Espinosa, Minister of Government & Justice (MOGJ) Olga Golcher, and other top GOP security officials briefed Ambassador and Emboffs July 14 on Panama's new national security strategy. The strategy is premised on the notion that the U.S. withdrawal made Panama responsible for its own security, as well as for security of trade flows through the Panama Canal consistent with the neutrality provisions of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty. It is also based on the emergence of new "asymmetric" threats and lays out three pillars: development of democratic institutions, external security, and democratic citizen protection. Espinosa and Golcher reaffirmed the GOP's continued commitment to partnering closely with the U.S. in ways that do not undermine the Panama Canal's neutrality. They hope to do both "traditional" military-type PANAMAX exercises, as well as a new type of exercise to boost cooperation among law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The GOP offered reassuring words regarding continued close ties to the U.S. Given the apparent disconnect between recent GOP actions and the high-minded aims of its new national security plan regarding corruption and transparency, we will continue to press the GOP to match its words with deeds. End summary.

National Security: Torrijos' "New Vision for a New World"

¶2. (S) Panama's Deputy National Security Director Marcel Salamin briefed Ambassador and Emboffs on July 14 with a 90-minute powerpoint presentation on the GOP's emerging new national security strategy. The plan is based on two fundamental assumptions. First, that the USG's hand-over of the Panama Canal and its related assets, together with the withdrawal of U.S. forces, also meant that Panama must assume responsibility for its own security. Moreover, the GOP believes that it must ensure the Panama Canal's neutrality for the benefit of global commerce and regional development consistent with the neutrality provisions of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty.

¶3. (S) The plan's second underlying assumption is that Panama must now cope with the emergence of new types of "asymmetric" and "unpredictable" threats that demand multilateral responses. Although the GOP recognizes the continued threat of conventional military threats, the GOP now emphasizes the civilian, rather than military, nature of

its response to these new threats, particularly in light of Panama's constitutional demilitarization (following the 1989 ouster of Manuel Noriega).

¶4. (S) In presenting the plan, Salamin stressed President Martin Torrijos' personal involvement in its development. He said that the plan brings together more than a year's worth of inter-agency discussions and coordination and that it represents a "new scenario" for Panama and the international community. Salamin concluded, "This plan is ambitious. But we can dream, can't we? All we ask is to be respected."

Three Pillars of the "Integrated National Security Plan"

Development of Democratic Institutions

¶5. (S) With "human security" as the foundation of the GOP's new national security plan, "democratic institutional development" is the first of the plan's three main pillars. Salamin said that the Torrijos administration has developed the "Panamanian Initiative for Democratizing the Public Space" ("IPDED" is its Spanish acronym) as a conceptual framework to carry out this pillar. He said President Torrijos will not seek another term, but aims to leave a legacy of a stronger democracy by bolstering local governments, boosting citizen participation, respecting press freedoms, ensuring transparency in government, and institutionalizing Panama's multi-ethnic population and protecting minority groups. The GOP will implement IPDED through various "governing plans" addressing a range of issues, such as energy, housing and urban development, training and education, cultural diversity, science and technology, public services and infrastructure, health, increased market openings (e.g., free trade agreements), and modernization of institutions.

Panamanian External Security

¶6. (S) With this pillar, Salamin said that the GOP hopes to make a "unique contribution to international peace and security." He said President Torrijos has stressed Panama's need to ensure international commerce in ways consistent with the 1977 treaty, i.e., not through military means. Noting that Panama effectively represents an "internal border for many countries," the GOP developed its "Panama Secure Trade and Transportation Initiative" (PST&TI) as a non-military tool for multiple partners to use in securing trade flows through Panama. Under PST&TI, the GOP envisions hosting an annual conference of the program's partners, creating an independent "board of advisors" for the President (akin to that used by the Panama Canal Authority), implementing a regime for non-intrusive container inspections, control of dual use items, and restricting the trade and transportation of weapons of mass destruction.

¶7. (S) The GOP is also developing "Biosecurity Programs" under the leadership of its National Secretariat for Science, Technology, and Innovation (SENACYT). These programs, which include the ministries of health and agricultural and the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory, are focused on combating the re-emergence of tropical diseases, forming a "network of bio-partners," establishing a regional center for bio-medicine, and developing a network for handling radioactive disasters.

¶8. (S) In addition, the GOP is focused on training programs for its merchant marine personnel and to develop security specialists for ports, airports, immigration, and customs agencies.

Democratic Citizen Protection

¶9. (S) This pillar is aimed at ensuring public safety and restoring the credibility of Panama's Public Forces through implementation of programs for social development, public security, and democratic institution building. Torrijos has issued several Presidential Directives aimed at, inter alia, improved hiring and training of Public Forces personnel, creating specialized units to address youth gangs, organized crime, and family violence, and creating a "Special Frontier Service" that essentially merges traditional police and military functions in border areas. Salamin mentioned the need for Panama's security services to have their own academies since officers who have studied overseas come back with "different ideas."

¶10. (S) In addition, the GOP plans to fuse its Maritime and Air services into a single Coast Guard, create a National Immigration Service, and establish a National Customs Service. The GOP is also using a \$22 million IDB loan to strengthen and modernize the National Police and to fully complete the transition of Panama's former military forces into an effective police force.

Implications for U.S. Engagement

"Neutrality" vs. "Alliance"

¶11. (S) Ambassador pressed Panamanian officials for clarity on whether Panama planned to pursue a new policy of "strategic neutrality" vs. Panama's more traditional "strategic alliance" with the U.S. National Security Director Espinosa and MOGJ Golcher reaffirmed the GOP's continued commitment to partnering closely with the U.S. in ways that do not undermine the Panama Canal's neutrality.

Military Training & PANAMAX

¶12. (S) Espinosa and Golcher blamed GOP "improvisation" and "internal miscommunication" for Panama's late cancellation of recent training exercises programmed earlier with DoD. They acknowledged the financial and other problems this caused for the USG and stressed their intent to improve GOP coordination with the DoD. They also stressed that the GOP recognizes the importance of PANAMAX and remains committed to it, but noted that, in keeping with their new strategic vision, the GOP would like to also develop a second type of PANAMAX-like exercise focused on addressing emerging "new threats" (e.g., terrorism and organized crime). Their hope would be to do both "traditional" military-type PANAMAX exercises, as well as this new type of exercise to boost cooperation among law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Planned SMN-SAN Merger and PTJ Changes

¶13. (S) The GOP has yet to set a date for its announced merger of the National Maritime Service (SMN) and the National Air Service (SAN) into a Coast Guard-like entity, although President Torrijos told Ambassador June 9 that it would be sometime after October 22, the date of the Panama Canal referendum. The administration is developing a new "maritime security doctrine" that would reflect this new entity and appears to have just started drafting the new "organic law" required to effect the merger. Salamin said the GOP wants its new Coast Guard to function primarily as a police agency, but recognized that its "other functions" would likely warrant military training. The same can be said for the creation of a Special Border Service, which will be separate from the Panamanian National Police (PNP). This service would answer to the MOGJ and would have combined police/military-type functions.

¶14. (S) As for planned changes to the "Judicial Technical Police" (PTJ - Panama's FBI equivalent), Golcher stressed that the GOP's plans to modernize the PTJ, along with

Panama's other law enforcement agencies, would not "undermine" the USG's significant investment in training for PTJ personnel. Stressing that "public safety is the top priority," Espinosa said that fifteen years of PTJ's existence has "clearly shown" the need for changes in the organization's mission and human resources management, but that the decisions do not rest entirely with the executive branch.

Comment: If Not in Deed, GOP at Least Reassures in Word

¶15. (S) The Ambassador had sought this meeting to seek clarification of GOP intentions, given a series of recent mishaps involving planned USG-GOP military training exercises, as well as hints that the Torrijos government may seek to distance itself from the U.S. for "neutrality" purposes. Although we don't discount the likelihood that old-guard PRD party types will continue to try and push Torrijos toward an "arm's length" relationship with the U.S., we were re-assured by Espinosa's and Golcher's recognition of Panama's historically close ties to the U.S. and their forward-leaning commitment to improving the GOP's coordination with us on military and law enforcement training. Given the ambitious scale and the heavy investment the GOP's new national security plan would likely require, they will need considerable help to carry it out. When we begin planning for the next budget cycle, the GOP will likely scrutinize closely the training we offer to see how it fits with their new plan, which clearly de-emphasizes military elements in favor of police work.

¶16. (S) Nonetheless, we are struck by the apparent disconnect between the growing influence of Noriega-era holdovers and recent GOP backsliding on anti-corruption (reftels) and the high-minded aims set forth in Torrijos' National Security Plan to, inter alia, promote democratic institutions, guarantee transparency, and respect freedom of the press. Though mindful of what the GOP says on this score, we will continue to watch closely what it does and will press the GOP to match its words with deeds. End comment.
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